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## A Pragmatic Study of Family-Theme Swearing Used in Compliments on Twitter

Aprilia Kartika Putri<sup>1)</sup>, Oktavianus<sup>2)</sup>, Rina Marnita<sup>3)</sup>

<sup>1)</sup> *Postgraduate Study of Linguistics, Andalas University, Padang, Indonesia*  
 E-mail: [apriliakartikaputri25@gmail.com](mailto:apriliakartikaputri25@gmail.com)

<sup>2)</sup> *Postgraduate Study of Linguistics, Andalas University, Padang, Indonesia*  
 E-mail: [okv\\_26@yahoo.com](mailto:okv_26@yahoo.com)

<sup>3)</sup> *Postgraduate Study of Linguistics, Andalas University, Padang, Indonesia*  
 E-mail: [marnita65@gmail.com](mailto:marnita65@gmail.com)

**Abstract.** Swearing is deemed as improper to use in certain settings. However, it can be used to convey positive emotions too, including complimenting something or someone. This research article aims to investigate the linguistic forms, pragmatic meanings, and pragmatic functions of family-theme swearing used in compliments on Twitter. Kreidler (2002), Ramlan (2005), and Ljung (2011)'s opinions were utilized in this research. Observational method was used to collect the data. Distributional and identity method were used to analyze the data. The results of this study demonstrate that: (1) linguistic forms of family-theme swearing are word and phrase, (2) the pragmatic meaning of the family-theme swearing is as utterance meaning, and (3) the pragmatic functions of the family-theme swearing are as Adjectival Intensifier and Anaphoric Use of Epithets. This research is hopefully able to assist EFL (English as a Foreign Language) students to communicate in English better with other English speakers on Twitter.

**Keywords:** pragmatic; swearing; family-theme swearing; compliment; Twitter

### I. INTRODUCTION

Swearing are certain forms of a language believed as inappropriate to use in particular situations. For example, the word *cock* is thought as fine if it is used in a clause *there is a fight between two cocks in my farm*, but it is judged as improper if a student in his college admission interview says *that politician is a cock*. Some scholars, such as Mohr (2010); Ljung (2011); Adams (2016), and Bergen (2016), do not discern swearing with *profanity*, *cursing*, *obscenity*, or *vulgarity*.

Moreover, there have been various studies about swearing and their usages for years. In a study by Jay and Janschewitz (2008), for example, it was found that swearing are used to convey emotion, especially anger and frustration. Nevertheless, there are also inquiries demonstrating that swearing can be used to utter positive emotions. In the studies by Wang (2013) and Wang et al. (2014), for instance, they discovered that swearing can be uttered to show surprise, joy, sadness, love, thankfulness, or solidarity.

Based on preliminary observation performed by the researcher, she also discovered that swearing can be used to express positive emotions. One of them is to compliment someone or something. It was found on one of social media, Twitter.

Twitter is a social networking site where its users can communicate via messages called *tweets*. It is declared as the second mostly used social media, with 326 million monthly active users (Maina, 2016; Statista, 2018).

User "X", for instance, on November 28<sup>th</sup>, 2018 sent a tweet with the pictures of her dog attached. Her friends, user "Y" and "Z" replied to that tweet,

*Tweet (X)* UM EXCUSE ME YOU LITTLE  
**FUCKER** I'M TRYING TO GET  
 SOME WORK DONE HERE

*Reply (Y)* NO WORKS ONLY PETS

*Reply (Z)* Omg that is so soft

(Source: User "X", "Y" and "Z" tweets exchange on Twitter, August 28<sup>th</sup>, 2018, 2:51 AM)

In the pictures, her dog bothered her while working on her laptop. She tweeted, “*UM EXCUSE ME YOU LITTLE **FUCKER** I’M TRYING TO GET SOME WORK DONE HERE*”, with capitalized letters. The use of capitalized letters on social media is generally understood as a sign of strong emotion. In this context, the capitalized letters emphasize the compliments. The word *fucker* according to Oxford Online Dictionary (2019) is an abusive term used to refer to a stupid person. In contrast, judging by the replies in the tweet, that swearing was used in a compliment.

There are some criteria why a word, phrase or clause can be said as a swearing (Ljung, 2011): (1) it contains taboo word(s) used in non-literal and metaphorical way (2) it is formulaic, and (3) it is used to convey the speaker’s emotion. For instance, in the sentence *I feel like I live in hell*, the word *hell* does not have the same meaning as *get the hell out of here!* In the first clause, *hell* is a metaphor. It compares her living space to something like *hell*. In the second clause, it is not compared to anything. The *hell* in the second clause is used to emphasize the speaker’s emotion, which is anger. Therefore, *hell* in the second sentence is a swearing, but in *I feel like I live in hell* is not.

Furthermore, swearing is categorized based on its linguistic forms and theme. Based on the linguistic forms, It is divided into word, phrase, and clause (Ramlan, 2005). On the other hand, it is also divided into ten themes based on their literal meanings: religious/supernatural, sex organ, family, prostitution, illness, ancestors, animals, racial/ethnic, death, and sexual activities (Hughes, 2006; Ljung, 2011).

Meanwhile, meaning of swearing is categorized into four categories. According to Kreidler (2002), they are lexical meaning, grammatical meaning, linguistic meaning, and utterance meaning. Lexical meaning is the same as literal meaning. Grammatical meaning, on the other hand, is influenced by grammatical systems of the language. Linguistic meaning refers to what is communicated by particular pieces of language (Kreidler, 2002). Kreidler (2002) also states that utterance meaning is defined as what is meant by someone in saying “such-and-such in a particular place”.

For example, in the sentence, *she fucking beat his ass*, the word *fucking* cannot be understood by using lexical, grammatical, or linguistic meaning. There is no way *fucking* in that sentence is meant as a sexual activity. From the utterance meaning point of view, however, it is used as an emphasis for a surprise felt by the speaker about how the woman could win over the man. Hence, *fucking* in that sentence can be comprehended by using utterance meaning.

Contrariwise, Ljung (2011) also describes that swearing has three pragmatic functions: as stand-alones, slot fillers, and replacive swearing. As a stand-alone, it functions as Expletive Interjections, Oaths, Curses, Affirmation and Contradiction, Unfriendly Suggestions, Ritual Insults, or Name-calling. As slot filler, on the other hand, swearing functions either as Adverbial/Adjectival Intensifier, Adjectives of Dislike, Emphasis, Modal Adverbials, Anaphoric Use of Epithets, or Noun Supports. In the last category, as Replacive Swearing, swearing replaces ordinary

non-taboo nouns and verbs and gives them new literal meanings.

As appealing as this language phenomenon sounds, to this day, researcher has not found any research about swearing usage, even less family-theme swearing usage, in compliments. Wang (2013) covers the positive and negative emotion when using swearing. This is in the same line with this study where swearing is used in positive expression. However, she excludes compliments in her study.

The same thing also happens in Drange et al. (2014) and Wang et al.’s study (2014). They also do not include compliment in their study of swearing usage. On the other hand, Indah and Rifana (2018) investigate compliments in their study, but they do not focus on the swearing. In brief, it is believed that a study like this, which explores the usage of swearing in compliments, have never been conducted before.

## II. METHOD

Data for this study are swearing used in compliments on social media Twitter. Contrariwise, the sources of the data are the tweets. The tweets elected are compliments with swearing in them. They are also limited to the ones with replies to help researcher find the context from them. Those tweets were all posted in December 2018. Researcher also took the data prior to December 2018 if they were not found in that month.

The data collection process was conducted by using observational method in the following steps. Firstly, the swearing in the tweets was found by using the *Advanced Search* feature on Twitter. Researcher used that feature to restrict the time of the tweets posted, i.e. from December 1<sup>st</sup>, 2018 until December 31<sup>st</sup>, 2018. Secondly, the tweets with swearing-contained compliments were separated from other swearing-contained tweets. Thirdly, the tweets were matched with the theories from Ljung and Hughes to confirm that they fit the requirement of swearing. Finally, the data were obtained, which were the swearing used in compliments from the tweets.

Meanwhile, the data analysis process was performed by applying distributional method and identity method by Sudaryanto (2018). The data analysis was conducted in the following stages. Firstly, the linguistic aspects of the swearing were classified, whether they are in the form of word, phrase, noun, adjective, et cetera. Secondly, the theme of the swearing was ensured as family-theme swearing. Thirdly, the pragmatic meaning of the swearing was identified. Lastly, the pragmatic functions of the swearing were also identified.

## III. FINDING AND DISCUSSION

The research exhibits several results. The first one is that the linguistic form of family-theme swearing used in compliments on Twitter during December 2018 was word and phrase. Family-theme swearing used in compliments were not found in the form of clauses.

This study also shows that the pragmatic meaning of the family-theme swearing in compliments posted during

December 2018 was as utterance meaning. On the other hand, it is also discovered that there were two pragmatic functions of family-theme used in compliments on Twitter during December 2018. The swearing functions as Adjectival Intensifier and Anaphoric Use of Epithets.

#### A. Linguistic Forms of Family-theme Swearing Used in Compliments on Twitter

Researcher found that the family-theme swearing used in compliments on Twitter in December 2018 were in the form of words and phrases. Their word classes were Adjective and Noun. On the other hand, the swearing was also found in the form of Noun Phrase. It was also discovered that by identifying the word class and phrase of the swearing, it aided the researcher in finding the pragmatic meaning and functions of the swearing. In this section, only parts of the tweets containing the swearing shown. Researcher also used pseudonyms to protect the participants' privacy.

1) *Word: Adjective:* An Adjective swearing was identified in the following utterance:

##### Datum 1

(a) fluffy **bastard** man  
Det. Adj. Adj. N

(Source: Participant "A" Twitter account, September 19, 2018, 3:33 AM)

The word *bastard* is a swearing because it fits the requirement of swearing according to Ljung. It had taboo word *bastard*, which was not intended as literal or metaphorical, formulaic, and meant to show the speaker's emotions, in this case to compliment how fluffy a man is.

Based on the word order rule in English, Adjective is usually placed in front of noun as it functions to explain the noun. Adjective can also be put in front of another Adjective to describe the Noun, as long as there is a comma between the two Adjectives. However, on Twitter, there is a tendency not to obey the English grammar (Grosbeck & Holotescu, 2008) as well as in formal settings. Therefore, there is a probability that the speaker did not use comma between the two Adjectives. The fact that the word *man* is a Noun strengthens this assumption. Therefore, *bastard* in that clause is an Adjective.

2) *Word: Noun:* A Noun swearing was found in the following clause:

##### Datum 2

He 's still a handsome **bastard**.  
Pron. V Adv. Det. Adj. N

(Source: Participant "B" Twitter account, December 19, 2018, 3:17 PM)

The word *bastard* in that tweet is still a swearing since the taboo word was not used in metaphorical and literal way, was a formulaic language, and emotive. Nevertheless, unlike in Datum 1, the word *bastard* in this tweet is a Noun.

Based on the word order rule in English, Adjective functions to describe Noun. It is also usually placed in front

of Noun. Since *handsome* is an Adjective, one can conclude that the word *bastard* in that clause function as a Noun.

The same thing happened to the use of swearing *motherfucker* below:

##### Datum 3

You (are) (a) clever **motherfucker**.  
Pron. V Det. Adj. N

(Source: Participant "C" Twitter account, December 18, 2018, 6:34 AM)

*Motherfucker* is a swearing because it was not used in metaphorical nor literal way, used to convey the speaker's emotion, and formulaic. It also functions as Noun in that clause since it is modified by the Adjective *clever*.

3) *Phrase: Noun Phrase* The following datum shows the use of a family-theme swearing as a Noun Phrase:

##### Datum 4

Look at this beautiful **son of a bitch**.  
V Dem-Pron. Adj. NP

(Source: Participant "D" Twitter account, December 8, 2018, 7:53 AM)

The noun phrase *son of a bitch* contains taboo word *bitch* in it. The phrase *son of a bitch* is formulaic, since it is found in dictionary as one of the entries. It is also categorized as swearing because it has taboo word *bitch*, which was not used metaphorically or literally. The whole phrase was also used to express the speaker's emotion.

Furthermore, swearing *son of a bitch* in that clause is a Noun Phrase. One can conclude that because it is "a syntactical unit and does not contain a finite verb or subject-predicate structure" (Richards & Schmidt, 2010). The word *son* acts as the Head Noun. Therefore, *son of a bitch* is a Noun Phrase.

#### B. Pragmatic Meaning of Family-theme Swearing Used in Compliments on Twitter

Based on this research analysis, it was discovered that the meaning of family theme swearing in compliments on Twitter is categorized as utterance meaning. It means that, these swearings cannot be comprehended literally or linguistically as they are. They need to be understood through the context and the speakers' objective in saying them. The tweets in this section are displayed in their original forms along with their replies. Researcher also code-named the participants to protect their privacy.

1) *Utterance Meaning: 'Man':* One of the many meanings of family theme swearing found in compliments on Twitter is as 'man'.

##### Datum 5

*Tweet (E)* Even in green and white he's still a handsome **bastard**.

*Reply (F)* He's like a fine wine.

(Source: Participants "E" and "F" tweets exchange, December 20, 2018, 1:21 AM)

Participants E and F were discussing Saulius Mikoliūnas, a Lithuanian professional football player, who plays for a



Lithuanian football club, *Žalgiris Vilnius*. Participant E uploaded a link to the article about the football player, which had his picture on it wearing the uniform of the football club. He also complimented Mikoliūnas' physical look. Participant F agreed to the compliment by saying *he's like a fine wine*.

A *fine wine* is an idiom used to describe someone attractive (Urban Dictionary, 2019). Participant E's tweet contains swearing *bastard*. However, the response from Participant F shows that Participant E's utterance was meant in positive way, as a compliment.

*Bastard* is a derogatory term for a person whose parents not married to each other (Oxford Online Dictionary, 2019). Swearing *bastard* in that tweet can be replaced with the word *man*. It is because according to English word order rule, Adjective is usually put in front of Noun. The word *handsome* is an Adjective; therefore, the word *bastard* is a Noun. Changing the word *bastard* with the word *man* would be appropriate for the context and the meaning of the tweet. Hence, *bastard* in that tweet can be substituted with *man*.

2) *Utterance Meaning: 'Girl'*: In the clause below, one of family-theme swearings was meant as the word 'girl'

#### Datum 6

*Tweet (G)* STUNNING MOTHERFUCKER  
THATS MY BEAUTIFUL BEST  
FRIEND AND I LOVE HER

*Reply (H)* Wow that's sum aggressive love  
right there, damn

(Source: Participants "G" and "H" tweets exchange,  
December 24, 2018, 8:43 PM)

Participant H tweeted a picture of herself and captioned it *Happy holiays*. Participant G then quote-retweeted that tweet by complimenting how beautiful Participant H was. She said *stunning motherfucker thats my beautiful best friend and I love her*. Participant H responded to the compliment by saying how it was "some aggressive love".

The word *motherfucker* was derived from *mother* and *fucker*. *Fucker* literally means 'a male who copulates frequently or well' (Spears, 2000). Combining that word with *mother* makes it literally means 'a male who copulates frequently or well with his mother'. However, in this tweet, the swearing was not meant literally. Replacing the word *motherfucker* with 'girl' is suitable for the tweet since there is an Adjective *stunning* before the swearing. This compliment was also directed to a girl. Hence, swearing *motherfucker* in this tweet means 'girl'.

3) *Utterance Meaning: to accentuate the Adjective*: One family-theme swearing in the tweet below was meant to accentuate the Adjective

#### Datum 7

*Tweet (J)* Honestly he could get my lass pregnant  
and I would raise them as my own. What  
a handsome bastard man

*Reply (K)* (laughing emoticon)

(Source: Participants "J" and "K" tweets exchange,  
May 18, 2018, 6:54 PM)

Participant J uploaded link to an article about Jamaal Lascelles, the captain of a football club Newcastle United. The article talked about how Lascelles played the most minutes compared to his teammates. It also attached Lascelles' picture. Participant J who was a fan of the said football club was happy with the news. He complimented Lascelles by saying that if he ever got Participant J's young daughter pregnant, "he would raise them as my own". Then, he proceeded to say how Lascelles *a handsome bastard man*. Participant K replied that tweet with a laughing emoticon.

The word *bastard* in Participant J's tweet was put between the Adjective *handsome* and Noun *man*. It means that the word *bastard* in that clause acts as Adjective. If the clause rewritten based on the correct English punctuation rule, it would be *what a handsome, bastard man*. It means that swearing *bastard* was merely meant as an accentuation of how handsome Lascelles was.

#### C. Pragmatic Functions of Family-theme Swearing Used in Compliments on Twitter

By considering the context and the speakers' intention as well as the swearing functions theory by Ljung, the pragmatic functions of family-theme swearing used in compliments on Twitter can be determined. It was found that there were two pragmatic functions of the family-theme swearing. They function as Adjectival Intensifier and Anaphoric Use of Epithets.

1) *Adjectival Intensifier*: In the following tweet, one family-theme swearing was used as an Adjectival Intensifier:

#### Datum 8

*Tweet (Q)* Beckham is one handsome bastard  
man.

*Reply (R)* Yeah he is indeed

(Q) Hes my MCM and inspiration for  
trying to look better.

(Source: Participants "Q" and "R" tweets exchange,  
December 19, 2018, 3:33 AM)

Participant Q complimented David Beckham, a former English footballer. He tweeted about Beckham's handsomeness. His friend, R, agreed with the statement. It is shown from her reply, *yeah he is indeed*. Then, Participant Q declared how Beckham was his MCM ('Man Crush Monday') and inspiration for looking better.

The word *bastard* in *Beckham is one handsome bastard* was meant to emphasize how handsome Beckham was. It was verified by Participant Q's later response that Beckham was his inspiration. Hence, *bastard* in that clause is the family-theme swearing used as an Adjectival Intensifier. It was used to intensify the word *handsome*, that Beckham was indeed handsome.

2) *Anaphoric Use of Epithets*: The following tweets exchange displays the use of family-theme swearing as Anaphoric Use of Epithets.

#### Datum 9

*Tweet (S)* Happy birthday @ T I love you so much u are a true gleam of light in this world u beautiful **son of a bitch** god dammit  
*Reply (T)* My god lmaoo, thank you bro!!  
(Source: Participants "S" and "T" tweets exchange, December 8, 2018, 6:57 AM)

Participant S congratulated Participant T for his birthday. Along with the greeting, he also complimented T. He wrote that T were "a true gleam of light" and that he was a "beautiful **son of a bitch**". T replied to that tweet by saying *LMAO ('Laughing My Ass Off') thank you bro!!*

The swearing *son of a bitch* can be substituted with the word *guy* or *man*. It means that it acts the same as anaphoric pronouns. This fits Ljung's theory (2011) about the use of swearing. Hence, in this context, the phrase *son of a bitch* was used as Anaphoric Use of Epithets.

#### IV. CONCLUSIONS

The results of this study demonstrates that (1) family-theme swearing found in compliments are words and phrases, (2) they can be understood through their utterance meanings, and (3) they function as Adjectival Intensifier and Anaphoric Use of Epithets. It is assumed that there is a connection between the linguistic forms, the pragmatic meanings, and pragmatic functions of the swearing. The family-theme swearing in the forms of Noun and Noun Phrase had a tendency to be meant as 'man' or 'girl' and function as Anaphoric Use of Epithets. Those in the forms of Adjectives, on the other hand, tend to mean as an accentuate to the Adjective and function as Adjectival Intensifier. Hence, swearings in the compliments do not change the meaning of the compliments into sarcasm or such. The utterances are indeed compliments and the family-theme swearings either intensify the Adjective or used as anaphoric pronouns for someone/something complimented.

Since research about the use of swearing in compliments have not been conducted before, the results of this study are hopefully able to help EFL (English as a Foreign Language) students understand that English swearing can also be used in compliments. As the closest English-speaking environment for these students is social media, including Twitter, the results of this research hopefully can assist them to communicate better with English speakers from other parts of the world.

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